Settlement and unsettlement in early America

The crisis of political legitimacy before the Revolution

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
SYDNEY MELBOURNE

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1981
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Lockridge, Kenneth A.
Settlement and unsettlement in early America.
(The Joanne Goodman lecture series)
Bibliography: p.
1. United States – Politics and government – Colonial
period, ca. 1600–1775 – Addresses, essays, lectures.
I. Title. II. Series: Joanne Goodman lecture series.
E188.5.L62 973.2 80-25658

ISBN 0 521 23707 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52234 X paperback

Contents

Introduction

IN 1607 several dozen Englishmen settled at Jamestown in Virginia. By 1776 two and one-half million Americans were involved in a revolution against British rule, a revolution which proved to be more revolutionary than many had intended. From this point on, the main lines of American history are clear. Washington was succeeded by Jefferson and Jefferson by Jackson as, president by president, both before and after the Civil War, Americans marched willingly or reluctantly into the modern age. One hundred and seventy years of colonial history largely without structure or theme are soon forgotten in the welter of events that followed upon the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the presidency of George Washington. Yet those long colonial years made the Revolution and all that followed possible and stamped the new nation irretrievably.

It is the job of the colonial historian to give coherence to incoherence in order that Americans may understand themselves better. Rising to this challenge, previous generations of historians have suggested the main themes of the colonial era. They have pointed out that Americans were independent,

religious, democratic, enterprising, and individualistic from the beginning, long before the Revolution. There is no reason to quarrel with these conclusions, or with still other analyses which have traced to the colonial era enduring conflicts over the distribution of power and of economic resources between elites and non-elites, native-born Americans and immigrants, Yankees and Southerners. In all these ways the colonial past contained the germ of the American future. The colonial era is, in these senses, no mystery at all.

Yet the way people three hundred years ago perceived their world is bound to remain in some degree a mystery. So many persons, so long dead, so many of whom left no record of their thoughts, must remain an eternally fascinating puzzle. Many new volumes of printed documents from the colonial era offer better access than ever before to the mental world of colonial Americans. Simultaneously, the kinds of sources historians are willing to consider and the ways they use these sources have expanded greatly in recent years. What was once called "intellectual history" has broadened into an enquiry into the way people saw their environment and responded to its challenges. For these reasons there is more cause than ever before to look anew into the attitudes of colonial Americans. This essay is one attempt to penetrate their mental world, using the sources and sensitivities of the latest generation of American historical schol-

arship. It is an effort to reach for the themes inherent in this world. It is not original because it owes so great a debt to such current historians as John Demos, Timothy Breen, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, Edmund S. Morgan, Rhys Isaac, and Gordon Wood. Rather, it is a personal synthesis written out of the delight which many historians have created in the history of early America.

What emerges on looking closely into the statements of the colonists themselves is that the colonial era was marked by a fruitless struggle to achieve a legitimate political order. In New England, the Puritans began by defining themselves to the brink of perfection. Every leader, every town, every ordinary individual was to seek that precise balance of social qualities which would assure both order and divine approval. But already by the end of the seventeenth century this delicately poised order had lapsed into two quite different views of the world, one hierarchical and the other localistic. Each of these views or principles strove for acceptance, and so for legitimacy, in a struggle which ran through the subsequent history of colonial New England. Their struggle emerged in explicit form in the course of the American Revolution. In Virginia and elsewhere in the South, the English settlements first manifested a chaotic individualism which was destructive of all public order. Here for a long time the problem was to evolve any principle of political order with a shred of a claim

to legitimacy. By the middle of the eighteenth century, native gentlemen had emerged atop a hierarchy of social and political authorities and had been widely accepted by the populace. But these gentlemen were in turn immediately challenged by an evangelical localism rather similar to that in New England, which rejected all their pretensions and which strove in turn to establish its own legitimacy. Here also the struggle continued into the Revolution.

The convergence of New England and of Virginia and the colonial South is one of the more remarkable features of the colonial world. By the time of the American Revolution each area could be characterized in terms of a similar struggle between two principles – one pious and localistic, the other worldly and hierarchical – both striving for legitimacy and neither able to succeed in the face of a skeptical environment and the claims of its rival. By the time of the Revolution, Americans elsewhere had also embraced one or another version of these two contending principles. They also were to suffer from the failure of either principle to achieve full legitimacy. All over America the Revolution saw a more dramatic playing out of this rivalry of localism and hierarchy and of this dilemma of failed legitimacies. Early Americans' inability to agree on a single principle of social and political order was to become hauntingly familiar to later generations of Americans. In the midst of rev-

olution, however, some Americans were already reaching for a more sophisticated conception of their social and political order better suited to a new age.